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Running from Being Yellow: My Memoir of the Hulk

Bobby Oerzen

All I wanted was a Rainbow Bright doll. I begged to hold her glassy blue stare in my hands. A blue stare hiding from me behind ropy orange locks that dripped down her face like melting Creamsicles. Her shimmering pristine glance would call me from her lofty toy shelf throne where she sat queen beside her vibrant king: Roy G. Biv. Her eyes, hair clip and plastic dress radiated in, what I would later know were, shades of cobalt, sapphire, navy and cyan. All I knew then was it was something I had to have.

"No son of mine is playing with dolls," my father asserted, colorlessly.

My mother argued like the vigorous feminist she was. I hid behind a door frame to hear my parents bounce arguments off one another like a verbal tennis match. I didn't understand any of the words, and certainly not any of reasons, but I knew their raised voices argued over more than Rainbow Bright. The Hulk Hogan Workout Set my father "surprised" me with a few days later implied my mother and Rainbow Bright had lost the argument.

The workout set came in a giant box bathed in intimidating black, boasting a bulging picture of a bearded lunatic. Inside a set of plastic barbells, swelling yellow headband, and tiny tank top affirming in block letters "Hulk Rules" waited to transform my little body.

I found the workout set to be a hulking enigma. I could not understand the function of the plastic barbells, whose circular shape led me to believe they were a type of roller-skate. Testing my presumption left a bean-shaped bruise that attested: plastic barbells are not roller-skates. Attempting to uncover the meaning as to who, or what the Hulk was and why in fact he "Ruled," did not immediately leave any noticeable bruise shaped clues.

What sparked my curiosity of Hulk was the flamboyant yellow that sang from his headband. Back then to label that elastic sweat receptacle a "headband" would have been a misnomer. To place it on my head would mean I couldn't gaze into its mesmerizing yellow fabric. So, it found a triple-tied home on my wrist as I used it as a reference in seeking out the origins of that intriguing yellow.

When I finally matched the hue to something on television, I was horrified to see it being shredded as if a piece of ethereal tissue paper. Like a rubber-necker on a highway, I habitually watched in dismay as the lunatic from the workout set box tore my color off his chest.

But I kept watching day after day. I began anticipating his entrance: a ceremony rife with grandeur as his blaring theme song complimented his sophomoric crowd gestures. My Hulk infatuation went as far as to incite my fingers to rip at my miniature "Hulk Rules" tank top. My mother, oblivious to Hulk and his shirt tearing idiom, scolded me with the ardor of a mom fearing for the future of her son's wardrobe.

That's when I realized yellow had become passe, anyway. I desired more colors so I again begged for Rainbow Bright. My father's answer to my plea echoed the words I heard in Hulk's theme song: "[You] gotta be a man."

Now the term "Hulk" serves as a patronizing brand for kids who believe they're tough guys. Regardless if it's the ubiquity of these faux Hulks, or the phonetic beauty of the word, "Hulk" has become a staple of conversation for me and my pretentious friends. It'll sneak into context when I'm driving by a roadside gym with Eddie, a philosophy PhD candidate, who in the midst of explaining an incongruence Nietzsche's paradox of eternal return, will interrupt himself mid-sentence to roll down his window and offer the caveat, "Hey Hulks, steroids shrivel your balls!"

It wasn't just Hulk's monochromatic yellow that relegated him to a demeaning term in my vernacular. Even after my shirt tearing days, I still watched the Hulk; but regrettably, Hulk didn't watch himself. Time treated Hulk like one of his irate opponents. The passing years body slammed his once impressive physique to a flabby Hulk isomer. His softball sized biceps and nutcracker pecs sagged as if they owed a great debt to gravity. I knew Hulk was down for the count when I saw him on his failed T.V. series: Thunder in Paradise. Hulk totted the premises of the show as "speedboats and babes in bikinis, brother!" Despite the alliterative adolescent allure those words should have held for me, I knew Hulk's career, and subsequently his life, was dismally pinned.

I thought I had completely nullified Hulk's influence when, in my freshman year of high school, I joined a sport that joined me. I became a long distance runner. Running challenged my preconceptions of manliness. I found runners paradoxically find strength in making their bodies more fragile. Runners display their skin clad bones like merits of toughness, a testament to how much pain they could whittle themselves down to.

Running would introduce me to Danny, the toughest person I would ever meet. Danny would bravely help push me through hot summer miles, as we ran side by side. Yellow no longer was the color I associated with being a man. It now became the color sweat makes when it coalesces to a tee shirt after a seething August run. It would be Danny that would pull me through those miles as Rorschach shaped sweat stains exploded on our shirts, sticking them to our bodies like second layers of hot skin. Every step propelled us further from Hulk's shadow.

Escaping Hulk's image didn't stop at the end of our runs. Our kids-clothing-sized bodies only formed the foundation of a Hulk counterculture. We traded their loud mouths for our skinny bodies. They traded their big biceps for our big words.

Just as I never was allowed to stare into Rainbow Bright's blue eyes, I would never fully escape Hulk Hogan. It would be Danny who would again confront Hulk with me, when, over a college break, my biology lab partner, Thomas, offered us an invite to a party. Or what he considered a party.

Thomas was one of those guys, who despite dire efforts, was never be capable of being a Tommy or even a Tom. Those monikers are reserved for those not carrying the Periodic Table of the Elements in their head. Ignoring the truths revealed by mirrors and SAT exams Thomas constantly offered weightlifting tips and forced himself to drink muddy muscle enhancing supplements. He seemed perpetually trying to prove the tight skin his bones wore was only a passing fashion trend he was destined to outgrow.

The party he promised looked more like a construction worker lunch break. A throng of dinosaur Hulks sat around a kitchen table playing poker. The Hulks didn't spare a glance from their cards to greet us.

Danny and I accepted the situation and sat unobtrusively in another room. Thomas ran into the kitchen to be dealt a hand. Danny made a fair assessment of the party atmosphere, pointing out: "I think your friend Thomas is going to be hanging somewhere by his underwear at the end of the night."

A girl suddenly appeared from the doorway, lugging a small copy of Lord of the Flies under her arm, as if it were an unwanted infant. Her facade told me everything I needed to know. Time and vanity had allowed her to craft her subjective beauty under the glow of tanning lights and the clownish application of makeup. Despite long hours she probably exerted in a gym, a bulbous chubby curve protruded under her shirt, like a phantom of late night partying. Danny and I both silently noticed it as she walked past.

"Lord of the Flies, what a classic," I offered, more to Danny than her.

"Then you do the damn paper," she said with a flippant voice followed by an arrogant snapping wrist. A wrist that snapped Lord of the Flies into flight, as it protested with mumbling pages and a flapping cover. The projectile found its target on my chest with the force of a feather rocket. The book hit my sternum with a momentum not from the blow itself; but the implications that brought it there.

I could have just let Goldman's words fall to the ground. But I didn't. Instead my legs, roped with all the right muscles for all the wrong reasons, kicked the book back at her.

"Do your own paper you ignorant, bitch," the sliding book and I said in unison.

The book moved in a slow motion slither like the languid milliseconds that precede a car accident. It crawled through those few futile moments when you know control's been completely lost. Its flux was a flipbook of peeling images whose only certainty lied in the

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impending impact.

"What? What! What!" sped the mantra from the poker table, as the words crashed like a three car pile-up. Colossal bodies materialized in the wake of the reverberating sound waves. They stood, in what seemed preplanned spots, arms folded and chins tilted as if posing for a group shot in a weight lifting calendar.

"Who just said that?" exploded the spokesman Hulk. Thomas' finger pointed at me like a bayonet.

I stood stoically frozen as each Hulk read me my sentence; phrased and rephrased as: "We're going to kick your fuckin' ass." "You little shit, we're gonna beat you within inches of your fuckin' life." "Your fuckin' face is gonna get stomped in."

"Yeah, and what would that prove? Simply, that you can?" Danny broke in calmly.

"He talked shit to Bruno's sister! Do you understand what the means?" spokesman Hulk shouted, seemingly annoyed a clarification was even necessary.

"I got the reference to verbal excretion, thanks. But you still failed to elucidate us on your rational pertaining to, as you so crassly phrased it, 'kicking my friend's fuckin' ass," Danny soliloquized, hardly able to hold back his mocking smile.

We were cast into momentary silence as only Danny, Thomas (who now stood with the Hulks), and I understood what had just been said.

"He insulted my friends, which hurts my pride. You think I can just let that slide? I'm a real man," Hulk finally retorted.

"Hey, how do you think Hulk Hogan would feel about you plagiarizing his theme song?" inquired Danny, as suddenly I realized why the Hulk's words sounded so familiar. I could practically hear the crashing guitar chords of Hulk Hogan's theme song: *"You hurt my friends, and your hurt my pride / I've gotta be man, I can't let it slide. / I am a real American, fight for the rights of every man / Fight for what's right, fight for your life!"*

One of the back row Hulks declared he no longer wanted to fight with words by raising his inflated limbs like vulture wings. That cued us to run like hell. We ran through the door. We ran onto the street. We ran leaving Thomas behind, who probably spent the night (to his chagrin) hanging somewhere by his underwear. As our pumping legs carried us to the corner, we ran toward a flashing yellow spotlight. Its yellow blink was like an angry Cyclops eye making me realize I could have easily walked away from that party. Instead, I was forced to run because I had to fight for what I thought was right. I had to fight for my life.

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Bobby Oerzen is a cliché: a young writer from New York City in a graduate program for creative writing. He dresses like a hipster, yet somehow is not hip. He is not smiling in his author picture because he believes that not smiling is hip. But he is not hip. His fiction has also appeared in Thieves Jargon, Word Riot, another article (on Hulk Hogan!) will be featured in an upcoming book on pop culture, and he is a contributing writer for humor website Collegehumor.com. If you write him an E-Mail (BobbyOerzen@Yahoo.com) there is a good chance he will respond. Unless he's devising some other way to be hip. Which he is not.

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